

The End of the Jews in Żarki

(from a book published by *Sifriat Poalim*¹)

*In memory of my brother **Cwi**,
who fell with his comrades in the Movement*

On Friday 1st September 1939, the war between Germany and Poland broke out and, already on Saturday the 2nd, at nine in the evening, the Germans were in our town. On Friday, complete chaos already reigned in town, as hundreds of refugees, who had fled from with their possessions, arrived from Upper Silesia. On Saturday at half past one, five aeroplanes appeared and bombed the *shtetl*. 150 victims fell, among whom 100 were Jewish. Many houses were destroyed. Only after the bombing did most of the populace - Jews and Poles alike - flee to the neighbouring villages.

The roads were crammed full with retreating Polish military, alongside which the civilian population was also fleeing. We walked on foot, whilst the Germans proceeded in vehicles – and, already on the second day, they had conquered the entire region up to Kielce. We realised that it was a lost cause as, wherever we went, we found the Germans already there. They gave out bread and sweets along the way and told everyone to return home. On the second day, they had already spread rumours that the civilian populace had shot at them, therefore they shot people and set houses on fire in each and every locality, including our own *shtetl*.

On 7th September, they captured men to the age of 45 and sent them to Germany as hostages. In our town, they abducted 30 Jews and 40 Poles. I was among them. They sent us to Lubliniec and, from there, to Nuremberg. There, we lived in an encampment which had hosted the National Socialist Party's yearly congress. We did not work there at all and we were given very little food. We stayed in Nuremberg until Warsaw had fallen, whereupon they took the Jews, who were there, back to Kraków. We travelled for nine days instead of two. We were given no food on the way, not even water to drink. We were taken to Czechia and, from there, to Przemyśl, up to the Soviet border. In the end, they left us in Kraków and put us in an attic in Bonraka, Kraków. There, we sat for another three weeks under horrific conditions. We received hardly any food and were not allowed to wash ourselves - our bodies became infected and were swarming with lice. The Jewish Community [viz. *Judenrat*] only set free the opulent ones who could pay large sums of money. In the end, after two months of wandering, they returned us home.

The Financial Situation in Żarki

During the first winter of the German occupation (1939-40), the financial situation in our town was not bad. We were on the border between the General Government [GG] and the Reich. We belonged neither to the Reich, as the border passed after the town, nor to the GG, as Dr Frank, the Governor of the GG, stated that we were not within his jurisdiction. All the decrees that were issued at the time did not affect us. When, throughout the entire GG, the Jews were forced to wear white armbands with a Star of David, we did not wear them. Also the limitations on Jewish commerce [and] the confiscation of different goods by the government did not hurt us. Jews traded and made money. Many goods were smuggled through the border town. We were only dependent upon the

¹ [TN: Most probably Aron Brandes' 96 pp. book "The End of the Jews in Western Poland," which was printed in Kibbutz Merhavia in 1945 by Ha'Kibbutz Ha'Artzi shel Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair (The Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair National Federation of Settlements), Sifriat Poalim (Workers Library).]

town's Polish mayor, Kowalik, who occasionally levied a municipal tax on the Jewish populace and gave the money to the Polish residents.

In May 1940, we were annexed to the Radomsko District. The Gestapo officers came and saw that Jews went about "unmarked" and were carrying on with business as before the War - their shops were open and they, too, were not marked with the sign "Jew". They immediately summoned the *Judenrat*, imposed a tax of 40,000 *złoty* on the Jewish population and implemented all the antisemitic decrees that had been issued until then. They sent ten *Volksdeutsche* (ethnically German Polish citizens) to us as a peacekeeping militia. When these arrived, they at once caused upheaval in the *shtetl*. They were bruisers from the underworld and they beat Jews at every opportunity. The *Judenrat* complained to Radomsko and people from the Gestapo came to investigate the matter. They decided to send the *Volksdeutsche* away and, in their place, a German gendarmerie was formed, which was also in our town at the time of the liquidation of the Jews.

The *Judenrat*

In all towns, the Germans established the so-called "Jewish Councils" [*Judenräte*]. These were effectively institutions which carried out the decrees against the Jews. The Jewish Councils were like "states" in their own right, with an apparatus that included different departments - for provisions, administration, finance, labour, social welfare, sanitary services, peacekeeping, etc. The head of our *Judenrat* was I.B. and his deputy was A.[x] M.

The entire German administration in the GG - from the Gestapo and the SS to the local gendarmerie - pursued bribes and pay-offs. Processing leather and soles was forbidden by law but, nevertheless Gestapo officers from Radom and Radomsko would come to the *Judenrat* and order 10-15 pairs of boots for themselves in one go, which had to be completed within eight days. In particular, they made leather coats of different colours for them. The Jewish Council was [also] required to provide the Germans with commodities they could not acquire, such as toilet soap from before the War, coffee, tea, and chocolate.

For all these things the *Judenrat* required large sums of money, so that it imposed heavy taxes. The vast majority of the *Judenrat* members were wealthy people. The greatest burden of all was shouldered by the middle class. Every day, demands for payment appeared and, if the tax was not paid in time, they sent the Jewish bailiffs, who seized bedding, clothes, coats, [etc.], or held those fined under arrest until the sum was paid in full. To the arguments of the Jews that they could not pay so much, Chairman B. replied, "It is only thanks to our actions that you have remained here. If matters reach deportation, they will take everything you have from you. You would do well to at least give half of your property of your own free will". There was not even one completely "kosher" Jew to be found - everyone had some "illegal goods", so that not a day went by without arrests. In these cases, the *Judenrat* provided assistance - for hefty sums of money.

There was no cooperation whatsoever between [the different] *Judenräte* in one district, or even within the same county. Each "chairman" did as he pleased. Chairman B. would go [directly] to the District Commander, to the Gestapo and did not require the mediation of the chairman of the Radomsko *Judenrat*, [Wiktor] Gutzadt, who was also the head of all the *Judenräte* in the district. Gutzadt had replaced [in May 1941] the previous chairman of the *Judenrat*, [Mojsze] Berger who, before the War, had been part of the Anti-German Boycott Committee and had made speeches against Nazi Germany. Berger was immediately detained and [eventually] set free for a large sum of money - but he was banned from remaining in Radomsko.

Labour

Directly following the German occupation, a forced labour law appeared, directed at Jews aged 16-60. In the summer, they worked at maintaining the courses of the waterways and clearing away bombed buildings. In the winter, they cleared the roads of snow. At first, the people were employed locally, in their place of residence. Later, when they began sending young men to labour camps in Lublin where conditions were horrendous, this peril hovered over our town also. The *Judenrat* took steps to annul the evil decree. A German road-building company, "Chemische Werke – Brigg²", then came to our *shtetl*. The *Judenrat* made a contract with them to provide them, every day, with the quantity of labourers they required. The company's chief engineer, a German named Schönwald, was among those who hated Hitler. He spent time in the company of Jews and granted favours to those who knew him. He listened to foreign stations on the radio and reported the news to his friends. From him, we gleaned much information. But he was drunk most of the day. One time, when his heart was merry with wine³, he openly reviled Hitler, thus incurring a severe penalty. However, he had taken part in the Battle of France and had been awarded high commendations, so that he was merely transferred to another city. Other Germans from the Chemische Werke company were also on good terms with the Jews. They transported goods for them in their cars, bringing flour, sugar, etc. into the town.

For the Ministry of Labour, the *Judenrat* prepared a list, according to which all the Jews were employed locally, so that they could not be sent to labour camps elsewhere.

Although the Żarki Jews were not sent off to other localities, they did suffer quite a lot with the forced labour - especially during winter. The Germans considered our town as an important point of traffic. Immense transports - many convoys of vehicles, travelling from the Reich towards the Eastern Front - passed through it regularly. They therefore looked after the roads particularly well. The War's first winters were extremely cold. People did not recall such a frost for many years. Every day, heavy snows fell and, every day, the Jews were sent out to clear them away. The Germans did not suffice with the organised workforce provided by the *Judenrat*, but [also] seized men for work, cruelly beating any Jew who was to be found at home.

Once, a German gendarme gave me such an intensive beating, that everyone thought I would not return from his hands alive. My blood poured from all sides. That same gendarme once caught a Jew, Icek-Szmul Wajs, walking to *shul* with his *tallis* and *tefillin*. For fifteen minutes, he beat him with a furious cruelty, until the Jew begged him to shoot him. His death made a great impression in the *shtetl*, as he was known as a good and honest man - and the life of a Jew still had some value then.

This same gendarme continued shooting Jews afterwards. He shot people on the spot for the smallest "crime". One of the gendarmes, the German Goetz, said of him, "But it wasn't a German who killed the first Jew in town - it was a Polish pig". This cruel gendarme was Polish and he came from Poznań.

Despite everything, our situation was better than in other places. The Jews, who came to us from Warsaw and Radom, said that we were "the Land of Israel". Jews still engaged in commerce and made a living. The goods from the Reich, which passed through our *shtetl*, were distributed throughout the entire GG. But the main source of income in town was from the processing of skins, or "*shefele*" [little lamb], as we called it. There was a "*shefele*" in every other house. The skins were then transported to Częstochowa, which was one of the GG's commercial centres. Patrols would

² [TN: בריג in the Hebrew original. We have as yet not been able to find a company thus named. In other parts of this book, it is referred to simply as "Chemische Werke."]

³ [TN: Reference to Esther 1:10: "On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine..."]

pass by on the way and confiscate the merchandise - and Jews were ruined in the blink of an eye. Nevertheless, they did not sit at home – for they needed to live. They continued transporting goods, thus risking not only their merchandise, but also their lives (for forbidden goods, Jews were sent to Auschwitz^{*)}).

When ghettos were being established in all the cities and towns, the Germans also wished to set up a ghetto in Żarki, but the *Judenrat* brought a committee in, which determined that it was impossible to establish a ghetto in our *shtetl*. The town's population consisted of 70% Jews and 30% Poles. The Poles lived on side-alleys and had fields and melon patches next to their houses and could not be relocated into the town centre, away from their fields. Furthermore, their dwellings were not sufficient to accommodate the Jews⁴. And thus, no ghetto was set up in our *shtetl* until the day of the deportation.

In the winter of 1940, we heard that, at the Złoty Potok [railway] station, there were a few carriages containing Jews deported from Płock. We immediately travelled to receive them. These Jews were distributed among all the localities and our town took in 200 of them. The *Judenrat* extended some aid to them, but it was like a drop in the sea compared with the scarcity. I was once walking along *ul. [?]*⁵, where the soup-kitchen was located. There, I met a Jew from Płock, who was carrying with him his meal from the soup-kitchen. I had heard that his only son - a four-year-old boy - had died. I inquired of him whether this was true. "I am returning now from the cemetery", he replied to me, "where I buried my son. But to save myself a walk, I picked up the pot with lunch on my way back". When I heard his words, I was shocked. This is what the Germans had already brought us to.

And there were [also] Jews who paid no heed to their livelihood, their food or the steadily worsening situation. The only thing they were interested in was politics. One such Jew was Josel Manela. He used to run to the houses of Poles of his acquaintance, who listened to foreign stations, and waited around particularly for people bringing news from other localities, [with which] he would race back to the marketplace. This was where his cronies hung about, tugging at every man's coat lapels, shaking him with force and literally yelling, "Good, Jews, good! You cannot imagine how [good]!" His tales spread quickly amongst the Jews. As we subscribed to the German press, he came to us to read the papers. When they contained articles in which the Germans admitted their defeats, he would dance with joy. Every day, the German press bemoaned the bombardments by the "British gangsters". Goebbels would present photographs of German cities in ruins. The Jews read this and, thinking that these bombings would bring victory, they rejoiced for the time being.

The Farm

As soon as the Nazis occupied Poland, they expropriated all the land that was in Jewish hands and gave it over to a German company to administrate. In our *shtetl*, there were seven and a half hectares of land, [with] orchards and fields of grain, which belonged to a Jew - Prusker⁶. Through the mediation of the local *Judenrat*, we approached the authorities with the request that the land be given over to us to work it and, after numerous endeavours, we were granted a permit to do so. We had no money with which to begin the work. We held several meetings with our friends and supporters, who raised the necessary funds. In the spring of 1941, we began working the soil. The first year, we planted potatoes, oats, carrots, beetroots, turnips, onions, etc. The harvest was

^{*)} This is Oświęcim – the death camp infamous for all eternity.

⁴ [TN: As this was the case, one wonders why the Germans did not simply fence off the centre of town, where the Jews were concentrated anyway.]

⁵ [TN: פּוּטֶק in the original Hebrew; the first two letters could be "Fu, Fo, Pu," or "Po," and the last two either "tak" or "tek." We have as yet been unable to find any street with a similar name.]

⁶ [TN: Variant of the surname Prusker which appears in other parts of this book.]

exceptionally successful and, that year, we had a yield of 100 [cubic?] metres of potatoes. We founded a committee from amongst our friends, which tended to all the farm's affairs. We saw that our means and possibilities there were not sufficient to utilise all the ground we had at our disposal. [My brother] Cwi travelled to Warsaw and returned together with our comrade Josef and the lawyer [Abram] Salbe^{*)}. A festive gathering was held at the farm, in which Josef, Cwi, and Salbe spoke, as did Chairman B. of the *Judenrat*. The meeting made a great impression on all those present who noted that, even during the Nazi rule of terror, we had created a fine project.

Germans also came to pay us visits and they were amazed to see Jews who knew how to work their land. The manager of the Joint, Borensztajn, came to us, accompanied by Falk, a Bund member, who was an employee of the Joint. They were pleased to see the work at the farm and Falk said that, despite the fact that he disagreed with us ideologically, when he saw a fine and pure undertaking, he was obliged to support it. Following their visit, we received support from the Joint for the purchase of livestock. We bought a horse, a cow, sheep, chickens, geese, etc. Some thirty members came from Warsaw to work in the farm. In autumn 1941, they travelled to Częstochowa, where they established a training *kibbutz* [commune].

One time, Chairman Gutsztadt of the *Judenrat* came to Żarki. Being as it was within his power to aid us extensively, a delegation approached him and told him about the farm, [and] about the role of the pioneering youth during the Nazi rule. Gutsztadt replied, "Zionism, pioneering — are not common currency at the moment. You may keep them in naphthalene until after the War. Izrael Borensztajn wishes to create positions for his relatives - that is the reason he established the farm and he probably appointed managers who are his family members".

We also encountered difficulties on part of the *Judenrat* in Żarki. We had settled with them that our members would be exempt from forced labour [but], in the end, they broke the agreement and sent "working orders" to our members.

In the spring of 1942, a *Volksdeutsch* arrived in Żarki to become superintendent of all the surrounding woods. He started proceedings to be given the farm also and had already secured a letter from the Ministry of Forestry in Radomsko to the effect that the farm was to pass into his hands. We sent someone to Radomsko and then to Radom and, with the aid of our friends, we managed to revoke the ruling. The *Volksdeutsch*, realising that he could not hold his own against us, agreed to the arbitration of the local gendarmerie. It was agreed that he would receive a small part of our harvest, in return for which he pledged not to make any [further] demands on us. [In that period,] he could still not come by Jewish property as he wished - it was not yet free for everyone's taking.

However, once the first news of the deportations reached us, we ceased investing in new ventures at the farm. Quite the contrary, we pulled out of it anything that we could. During the first deportation from Warsaw in July 1942, when we required large sums to save people and we had no money, we continuously sent produce from the farm and helped as much as we could.

The farm became the centre of our movement [viz. *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*]. Its whole board of directors, such as Josef Kaplan, Tosia Altman, Mordechaj Anielewicz^{*)}, Miriam Hajnsdorf, Aryje Wilner and others, visited it regularly. As a result, we were in constant contact with the central cities in Poland and with the whole of the Zagłębie [region]. Talks, dedicated to events in the world and in the Jewish ghetto, were held regularly. Mordechaj brought reports on the political situation [and] the state of affairs in the different fronts. He drew maps and, on them, traced the lines of the front.

^{*)} Salbe was one of the founders of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* in Poland and was later active in the Democratic faction of General Zionism.

^{*)} Later, the leader of the Jewish Fighting Organisation [ŻOB] in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Josef told of life in the ghettos of Warsaw, Radom, Lwów, Wilna, etc. Aryje spoke about the Polish Resistance. By then, he was already in contact with the leaders of the PPR^{*)} and [Władysław] Sikorski's groups, and he had a great deal of information regarding their activities.

In the first days of October, [Szlomo] Waga came to us. He arrived from Warsaw, where, at the cemetery, he had met with his comrades from the ghetto. This was after the first deportation from Warsaw and only 80,000 Jews remained there. Our comrades managed to intercept a secret document which was sent from the NSDAP⁷ in Warsaw to headquarters in Berlin. It was a report on the deportation of the Jews from Warsaw, in which it was said,

A large part of the Party was opposed to the deportation from Warsaw, on the grounds that not only the Jews, but the Poles would also revolt against us. And, lo and behold, the deportation has been carried out, over the course of which 90% of the Jews were liquidated, and not only the Jews, but the Polish street also, remained passive. We executed everything without a single shot being fired.

This report made an indelible impression on us all.

The First News of the Deportation

Already in March 1942, our comrade Josef Kapłan arrived from Warsaw and, with him, brought the protocol which had been composed by the YIVO⁸ Council regarding the annihilation of the Jewry of the Warta region. The Germans had gathered 80,000 Jews in Chełmno, upon whom they made their first attempt at killing with gas. From every group of Jews, a few gravediggers were selected, whose task was to bury the dead, whereupon they, too, were shot. One of the diggers had managed to escape and make it to Warsaw, where the YIVO Council took down his eyewitness testimony. When we read the protocol, we all wept but, deep inside us, we could not believe that all this was true, that such things could be done to human beings. Josef also read the protocol to the Częstochowa *Judenrat*. They told this to Dr [Richard] Wendler, the Częstochowa city commissioner, with whom they were on good terms, to which Dr Wendler replied that it was horror propaganda on part of Germany's enemies.

The first news of deportations began to arrive from Lublin, then from Warsaw. Each day [brought] new tidings of Job⁹. But the mood became [truly] despondent once the deportation began in the Kraków region and we saw the first refugees who had fled from Wolbrom and Pilica to our *shtetl*, where peace still reigned. Meanwhile, the lives of the Jews became free for everyone else's taking. Every day, the gendarmerie murdered Jews in the streets. The flight to the villages ensued, despite the prohibition on Jews leaving their localities. At first, the belief was that those, employed in the *Judenrat* and its various committees, would be exempt from deportation, so that they put committees together, including in them whomever they [could] include. One seventy-year-old woman was even added to the Sanitary Committee. Identity cards were issued, bearing the stamp of the District Commissioner and bearing the holder's photograph. From Żarki's 3,000 Jews, 300 different committees were created. But, once it became known that the committees did not make one exempt from deportation, they began trying to find labour in a bid that this would save them. In our town, there had been no factories or workshops working for the military and, only now, did the Jews start making efforts towards opening a workshop - a tailoring one, to produce vestments for the army. They renovated the burnt Synagogue, which had stood empty since the beginning of the War. They found a German who agreed to serve as commissioner and sent him to Kraków in order to

^{*)} The Polish Workers' Party [*Polska Partia Robotnicza*] - the name of the Communist Party following the German occupation.

⁷ [TN: *The National Socialist German Workers' Party - the official name of the Nazi Party.*]

⁸ [TN: *The Yiddish Scientific Institute, nowadays known as the Institute for Jewish Research.*]

⁹ [TN: *The news the messengers brought to Job (Job 1:14-20) regarding the theft of his livestock and the slaying of his sons and servants.*]

obtain a permit for the enterprise from the authorities and to bring back orders. But he returned empty-handed - why [establish] new workshops, when the old ones were being liquidated?

The German Ministry of Labour recommended seeking employment with "landowners", who had estates in the vicinity. Contracts were made with German estate owners - or with those whose estates were managed by German commissioners - regarding the employment of a specific quota of Jewish labourers, and the contracts were approved by the Ministry of Labour. Thus, 50 youths were sent to Złoty Potok and another 70 to other locations. The Jews besieged the *Judenrat* [premises] all day long, hoping for its aid - but what was "alright" today, was no longer enough tomorrow.

The *Judenrat* members appointed themselves "commissars" and commanders of the Jewish *Ordnungsdienst*, and put hats with two or three stars on their heads, like those of the Jewish peacekeeping force (although the latter had no stars). All this happened not just in our town. The situation was similar in all localities - in Częstochowa, in Radomsko and in every other place, the *Judenrat* people donned hats emblazoned with stars.

The Deportation from Żarki

It was 21st September, *Erev Yom Kippur*. All the Jews were going to *Kol Nidrei*. We, a group of friends, stood in the marketplace, looking at this picture of a pure Jewish *shtetl* - all the shops shuttered, Jews walking down the street, greeting one another. In everyone's heart was but one aspiration - to be saved from the decree! All wept. We stood by, contemplating all this, unable to tear ourselves away from the scene. We knew all this would soon vanish and that only mounds of debris would remain. Chairman B. passed by and said to us, "A Jewish town such as this - if it could only last for many years to come! But for now, we are in need of mercy - for who knows what will be tomorrow?"

The following evening, a Jew - Wajnszok - came over from Częstochowa and told us that the commando for the extermination of Jews had already arrived in Częstochowa. We realised our days were numbered. On 4th October, our comrades from Złoty Potok went over to the nearby village of Janów to discuss some matter with the village elder. He told them that, on the 6th of the month, the Polish community in Żarki had ordered forty wagons from him. The comrades immediately returned to town and informed the *Judenrat* of this. At once, they ran to investigate what these wagons were for. The Polish community's officials stoutly denied the report and declared that they knew nothing at all. They had been our good friends, lived alongside us for decades and made their livings from us and, now that we were in trouble, they did not even wish to tell us. The *Judenrat* telephoned Radomsko and apparently the truth got out as, that night, they sent their families in a vehicle to Pilica. Now, true pandemonium broke out in town. Without caring whether travel was permitted or not, or if one had transfer papers or not, everyone began fleeing to the villages and the vast majority fled to Pilica.

At five o'clock in the afternoon, the German and Polish police came to all the workplaces to take the Jews, who worked in the villages, bring them to town and release them there. Many of them still managed to escape, even though guards had already been stationed on all roads.

At six o'clock in the morning the commando for the extermination of the Jews arrived, which consisted of 100 Ukrainians and Germans, in addition to the local gendarmerie and the Polish police in the vicinity, which took part in the *akcja*. All these went with the Jewish policemen from house to house, yelling, "Juden, raus!" [Jews, out!]. Everyone had to gather at the market square - that was the "concentration point". At the time of the deportation, there were 3,200 Jews in our *shtetl* and only 780 presented themselves. The rest either hid in bunkers or fled. The Jews, who were found in

their homes or in some hiding-place, were shot on the spot. Mojsze Krzepicki's daughter, a wonderful woman, gave birth to her firstborn the night before the deportation. When the Germans came and demanded that she go to the concentration point, she was unable to stand up. They shot the child first and then her.

Fajwel Rozenbaum was unwilling to go to the concentration point and he sat down to study Torah with his son Icze. When the Ukrainians came and demanded that they go to the "point", they disobeyed and continued studying. The Ukrainians shot them dead then and there. Many Jews wrapped themselves in their *kittel* [ceremonial white robe], with their *tallis* and *tefillin*, and sat with their books - and they fell thus.

They retained thirty Jews for the liquidation of Jewish property. Those remaining were tasked with slaughtering 100 chickens for the Germans and Ukrainians and with cooking the chickens for them. All the rest of the Jews were taken to the nearby railway station - Złoty Potok. There, everyone was loaded onto freight carriages. Many were shot directly - mothers who refused to give up their children or those who attempted to abscond. Among the thirty Jews were twelve policemen. Before sending the transport away, the Germans took six policemen to escort it to the railway station, promising they would afterwards return them to Żarki. Next to the carriages, they knocked off their hats, took their boots and then threw them into the carriages. The transport was taken to Częstochowa, where other carriages with Jews were added. They were all taken to Treblinka. Almost 300 Jews managed to escape to Lelów. That same day - 6th October - the Germans arrived and surrounded the locality, drove the Jews to the concentration point and took them to the Koniecpol railway station. And, together with the Jews of Koniecpol, they were transported to Treblinka.

In Pilica

2,000 Jews escaped the deportation. The majority of them fled to Pilica. In the Kraków region, to which Pilica belonged, the deportation had already been carried out five weeks earlier. Of the Pilica community's 2,500 Jews, 1,500 were sent to Beżec and 1,000 escaped. More than 500 of them came to our town but, when things "warmed up" for us too, they returned to Pilica. The chairman of the [Pilica] *Judenrat*, F. [Fogel], who was in charge of liquidating the Jewish houses, opened up the sealed houses in the side alleys. F. gave us a few of these houses also, but the crowdedness there was great, for in a narrow room 8-10 people lived, sleeping on the floor, as there were no beds - and there was no space for them anyway.

The Partisans in Pilica

F. operated on two fronts. On the one hand, he collaborated with the Germans by giving them information on the illegal Polish groups, yet he most likely only denounced a few of them - mainly the antisemitic ND¹⁰ groups. On the other hand, he was an ally of the Polish partisans, with whom he was in contact and aided in their fight.

We came into contact with the partisans and began to operate with them. First of all, we distributed flyers amongst the Polish population against the Nazi invaders, as well as against the deportation and liquidation of the Jewish populace. We wrote the flyers on a typewriter in F.'s *Judenrat* premises. We also took part in operations which the partisans carried out, in the vicinity, against peasants who sympathised with the Germans, by attacking military targets. It can be said that, without exaggeration, the entire rule of the town was in F.'s hands and he treated the refugees who came from other localities very well - even those from Radomsko. He was on friendly terms with the

¹⁰ [TN: National Democracy (*Narodowa Demokracja*); also known from its abbreviation ND as "Endecja".]

leader of the Gestapo in Kraków who [once] said to him, "All the Jews without any exceptions - will be exterminated. But you are the best Jew of them all and you, therefore, will also be the last one. And if they meet a Jew in 1943 in the GG, they will need to bow before him."

Back in Żarki

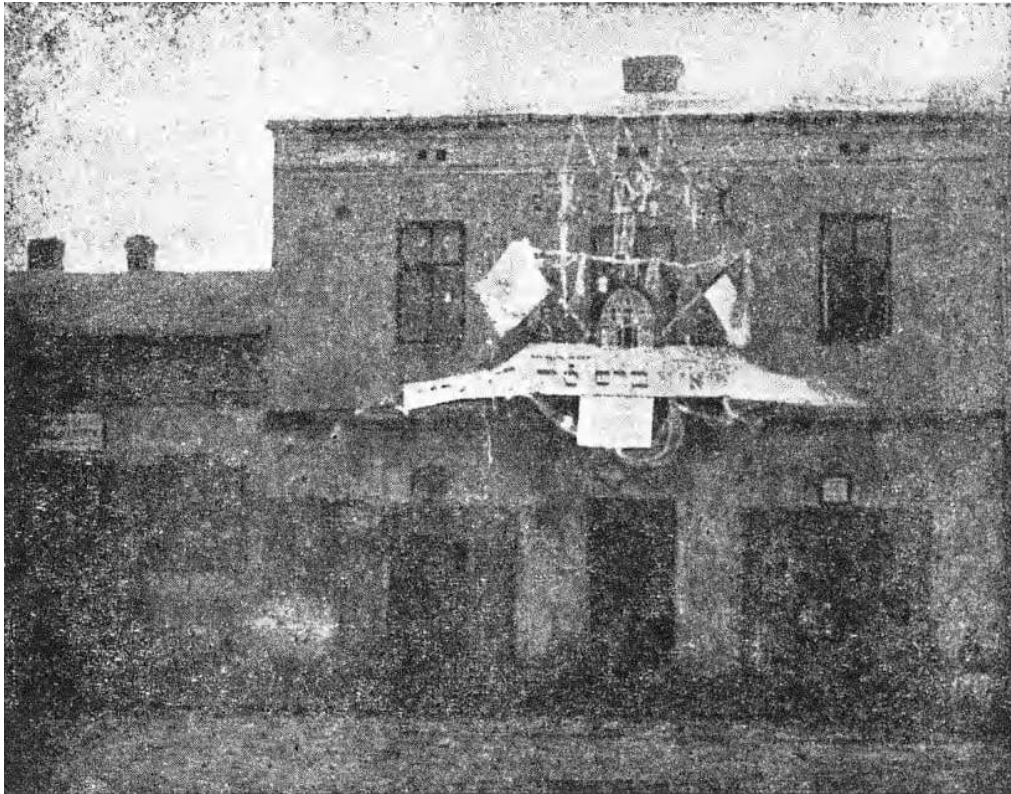
No more than thirty Jews were allowed to reside in Żarki. If one Jew "too much" was found there, the Poles immediately turned him over to the gendarmerie, which held him under arrest. Once they had gathered a number that was "worth the effort," they sent them off to Częstochowa and, from there, on to Piotrków, because the transports to Treblinka departed from there.

We, those returning, were forced to hide in bunkers [and] in attics. In a locked-up Jewish house, one opened a window or climbed onto the roof and from there – inwards. The most difficult problem was that of provisions, as we could not go out and buy something. The authorised Jews prepared bread, coffee [and] water for us during the day and, once darkness fell, we emerged from our holes and snuck over to the building where they were housed to receive the food. More than thirty of us were living in an attic walled in with bricks, which one accessed from the roof. The cold intensified and, in the freezing houses and attics, it was hard to bear the piercing chill. To our good fortune, in our attic, we found a great quantity of bedding hidden by the Jews before their deportation, in which we lay cocooned all day long. When one brought a hand out from under the covers, it froze. At night, two or three of us descended and fetched bread and a bit of hot coffee [and] one bucket of water for the entire 24 hours. The mother of our friend, Hercberg, caught a chill in the attic. She began coughing violently and spitting up blood - and there she gave up her soul.

Chairman B. made efforts to have the number of Jews engaged in liquidating the Jewish property increased, and he succeeded in raising it to 80 and then to 100. When the last 20 were added, B. also added me and so I became authorised - a liquidation squad man. Every morning at seven, we went to the Synagogue for roll call. The lieutenant would come and count us, to see whether someone was missing or had been added. We then split up into three groups and passed, street by street, through all the Jewish houses, one by one - and liquidated everything. The finer furniture, linen and clothes were taken to the Synagogue, which had been converted into a warehouse. There was another warehouse at Warszawski's for the rags and old things, but the majority of the possessions were sold to the Poles. Every day was Fair Day in town. Hundreds of peasants - and city people as well - came from the surrounding area and bought everything for low prices. A wardrobe or two beds were sold for 50 *złoty*, whilst a loaf of bread cost 30 *złoty*. And the rule with the liquidators was that they carried out the work on their own responsibility, without supervision on part of the Germans. When they entered a room, they tore up the floor, punched holes in the walls [and] dug up the soil, in case something had been hidden there. If they found anything of value, they took it for themselves. Not one cooking range was left in one piece, because they looked inside them also, looking for money. Some among the liquidators amassed treasures, saying that it was better that they should remain in Jewish hands, instead of falling into those of the Poles who would move into the dwellings and settle there.

It was hard to witness such scenes in a Jewish house. They managed to ruin everything within one hour. Entire libraries - books, albums with photos - were loaded onto carts and taken to the scrapyard. It was forbidden to leave even the smallest piece of paper in the rooms, attics and cellars. In our *shtetl*, there was a library which our *landsman* Abram-Josef Szybel had built in memory of his deceased wife, Zysla-Malka Szybel. It was one of the finest libraries we had in Poland. My heart

groaned inside me when the books were loaded onto the carts and turned into a pile of *shaimes*¹¹. But when we headed for eradication, what need was there for books? Who would read them?



The Zysla-Malka Szybel Library

The whole *shtetl* resembled a graveyard. You could roam about it from six in the morning to six in the evening without meeting one single live person. I passed by our own house. How merry this building had always been! The members of the Movement from Warsaw and Częstochowa - alongside us, the local members - had sat together every single evening in conversation, speaking about life in the ghettos [and] about general and local issues. And now - [just] strange voices. A Pole - our neighbour - was already living there. That is what they had been waiting for - to inherit our houses [and] our possessions. Prior to the deportation, Jews left their valuables with their Polish neighbours for safekeeping. Now that we had returned to Żarki, without any means of sustenance, we approached them in a bid to redeem what had been left with them and to sell it for bread - but they refused to return it to us.

The Germans were aware that some of the Jews managed to hide in villages, bunkers and forests - but why should they chase after each individual Jew? They decided to concentrate them in specific spots, to be exterminated at a later date. Then orders came from GG Governor [Hans] Frank to the effect that four ghettos were to be established in each region. All the Jews were to gather there by 20th November. Any Jew found, after this date, outside the enclosure of the ghetto would be categorically shot. In the Radom region, the four ghettos were set up in Sandomierz, Ujazd, Szydłowiec and Radomsko. Being no longer able to continue surviving as they had, all the Jews presented themselves of their own free will before the *Judenrat* and were sent to the nearest ghetto

¹¹ [TN: Also pronounced "shemos" or "shemot," Heb., lit. "names (of God)"; term used in Judaism in reference to religious texts discarded due to dilapidation caused by extensive usage, which may not be simply thrown away alongside common rubbish, but require a separate interment, due to the fact that they contain the name of God - thus the appellation "names."]

- Radomsko. The number of authorised Jews in Żarki was once more decreased and set at 30 - all the rest were sent to Radomsko. I, too, was among them.

In Radomsko

During the first deportation, which took place on 8th October 1942, there were some 10,000 Jews in Radomsko - as all the Jews from the surrounding towns had been concentrated first in Radomsko. The Germans left only 350 of them, but even this number was too large in their eyes, so that they sent off another 150 - leaving just 200. Of all the Jews, only 50, who were able to manage on the *Aryan side*, were saved. The rest were sent to Treblinka. Of all the large number of youth who were in Radomsko, they did not select even a handful to be sent off to labour camps, but they were all taken instead to Treblinka.

In Radomsko, they gathered 5,000 Jews from the entire surrounding area and put seven large houses at their disposal. Between twenty and thirty people lived in one room. There were six families in the room where we lived, who numbered a total of twenty people. The sanitary conditions were horrific. Before going to sleep, each of us deloused his garments and everybody was swarming with lice. We were very surprised that the ghetto was not guarded in any manner. Only one Polish policeman ambled about by the gate and one could come and go. At first, when we thought that the ghetto would be a closed one, everyone began hoarding foodstuffs but, later, when it was left open, all could be brought in from the outside. There was no shortage of anything and everything could be purchased for money. The majority of the Jews, however, had no money.

Labour

Every Jew, to the age of sixty, was required to work three times a week. Our only work was the demolition of old houses. There was no other labour locally. The Jewish policemen supervised the muster to the work. If they came upon someone in the street or in his room without a working certificate, they took him to the "Jewish Peacekeeping Service" [*Ordnungsdienst*] and gave him a sound thrashing, after which he was forced to pay the amount which they had fined him. These peacekeepers had been recruited from the underworld. They would get drunk and play cards with the German gendarmerie. Once, when I was visiting a friend's house, in the next room, I saw the Chief of Police, Markewicz, playing cards with another policeman for 80,000 *złoty*.

Once more, an episode of pursuing workplaces ensued. It was promised that whoever was working in a factory producing for the army, would not be deported. In town, there was just one factory - "[Thonet-]Mundus" - which produced wagons and sleds for the military - and for the *kehilla* [viz. *Judenrat*] and took 1,000 *złoty* from every person wishing to work there. Chairman Gutzstadt of the *Judenrat* promised our members "free" work there, but we did not wish to accept it, as we already knew what the value of an "essential workplace" was, once the time came for a Jewish community to be deported.

Contact with the Partisans

We met with youth who were in Radomsko. They were looking for a way to the partisans, but they had no address - to whom, where and when - to apply. We decided that we would send Comrade Eliezer to Pilica to contact the groups of partisans with whom we had become acquainted during our stay there. Poles fell upon him on the way, robbing the money that was in his possession and even his coat. He met with the leaders of the partisans and came with one of them to the Radomsko

Ghetto. He met our "fives"¹², with whom he was very favourably impressed. It was decided that we would all be transferred to Pilica. They promised that, in order to effectuate our translocation, they would send a vehicle within a few days, as well as weapons to defend ourselves with on the road.

Immediately afterwards, Comrade Tadek came to us from Warsaw. We made an agreement with him that, unless we went to the woods in the next few days, we would transfer the majority of our members to Częstochowa and the smaller part to Warsaw.

Many Jews from other ghettos came to Radomsko. They said that the situation there was much worse. Jews arrived from Szydłowiec, Ujazd [and] from Piotrków also.

On 2nd January 1943, the Gestapo informed the *Judenrat* that Jews had received the opportunity to travel to the Land of Israel, with precedence given to the following:

- 1) Those who were citizens of the Land of Israel;
- 2) Those whose family members were there;
- 3) Those who had distant relatives there.

The latter were required to provide the exact address of these relatives. The *kehilla* began a registration of those wishing to emigrate. The registration point was extremely crowded - hundreds of Jews stood in line and more than 3,000 people were registered. The night following the registration, the *Judenrat* held a meeting, where they drew up a list of only 300 individuals who were eligible for immigration. All the members of the *Judenrat* were included in this list. They were unwilling to include any of our townsmen, on the grounds that many of us had already been saved - over 50% of our population was in Radomsko, whilst the Radomsko residents, themselves, had all been sent to Treblinka, so that it was their obligation to rescue their own surviving townsmen. The mood in the ghetto improved. Jews spoke of nothing but the Land of Israel - which is what the Germans wanted. Even before that, they had added two buildings to the ghetto, as they admitted that the crowdedness was too great. The *Judenrat* still kept up the social order up - one who paid several thousands of *złoty* received a dwelling in the two new buildings - and even two rooms for one family. The Germans also brought four doctors over from Częstochowa. The doctors, alongside the Jewish sanitary service, immediately began inspecting the rooms and courtyards. From this, sprung forth a ray of light - it was thought that the paltry thousands of Jews living in the ghetto would already be spared.

On 5th January, Henech and I paid a visit to Chairman Gutzstadt. He stated that all the information regarding the fact that the attitude of the Germans towards Jews had changed and that the ghettos would remain until the spring, was utterly groundless. As far as he knew from his German acquaintances, nothing in their attitude had changed. We, the youth, needed to survive. We therefore needed to escape and not [remain] sitting in the ghetto. Gutzstadt had changed unrecognisably. The Germans had taught him not to trust anything they said. He already foresaw our impending demise and this influenced him. As we spoke, a Jew, who travelled every day to Częstochowa in the *Judenrat's* car, came in and told us that he had seen 300 Jews there being taken, with their hands raised, to the [railway] station. Gutzstadt said he would send a messenger, at once, to find out what had happened there. In the evening, panic broke out in town - a new deportation had been scheduled. We ran to Gutzstadt to hear about the situation but, at his house, all the doors were locked. As it turned out, he had fled to the *Aryan side* in Warsaw, where he had transferred his family in good time.

¹² [TN: Units of five ghetto fighters each, who operated as teams; see also *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. II, cols. 236-237, regarding the same system in the Częstochowa Ghetto.]

We wanted to rent carts and travel to Częstochowa, but it was impossible to find any carts. We decided to wait until the morning - a sleepless night. At eleven o'clock at night, 300 Jews from Częstochowa were brought to our ghetto. At five in the morning, I went out to the ghetto. There was silence all around and the ghetto was not yet surrounded. I went to Henech's. We sat about in his room for half an hour or so, while the Germans were already coming and taking everybody away. All were required to proceed to the *Judenrat* courtyard. When I exited the building, rows of German policemen were standing [outside]. Despite that, Henech's brother attempted to escape - they shot after him and we witnessed his falling. We went up towards the *Judenrat* courtyard. From there, they did not allow one to access other buildings, so that I was unable to make my way [back] to our own house. We began running in all directions, looking for a way to flee the ghetto, but Germans stood everywhere, pointing their guns at us. Henech, a young man of twenty-two, said to me, "Onczia¹³, we're like ninety-nine-year-olds - our life is finished".

In the streets, Ukrainian songs were already heard. We approached a Polish policeman and told him that we would give him money if he let us out. He passed this on to the German guards, who agreed to release four individuals at the rate of 1,000 *złoty* per person. Immediately after the Gestapo's inspection, they opened the gate but, instead of four, six people went out.

Once we had fled the ghetto and had gone out into the town, we went up to a house which stood to one side and entered it. There, a Polish labourer was living with his family. We told him that we were Jews and that we had escaped from the ghetto. He provided us with food and drink and took us to a coachman, of his acquaintance, to hire a cart to Częstochowa for us. On the way, we met two other friends, who had also escaped from the [Radomsko] Ghetto, and they told us that the deportation had been postponed, but that the ghetto was surrounded by Ukrainians. For money or a gold watch, even the Ukrainians were willing to let one go.

We reached Częstochowa in the evening. There, we had Polish acquaintances, who smuggled all our members from the GG over to Zagłębie, which had been annexed to the Reich. Even members from Warsaw and Kraków were smuggled across the border. By the time I went to one of these Poles, L., he had already left home. He returned late at night, when there was no longer any train to Radomsko. At five in the morning, I returned with L. to Radomsko and, at seven, we made our way to the ghetto. Once we had come up very close, I could see that they had started taking the Jews away from the houses to the *Judenrat* courtyard, which had become a "concentration point".

I shall never forget what I saw. There were 5,000 Jews in one place, with Germans and Ukrainians running around them and shooting. These Jews had already fled from different localities, where the decree for deportation had taken place and they were aware that they were all being sent to their deaths. They wailed and screamed, until their voices were heard throughout the entire town. Everyone was carrying bundles but, when they loaded them onto the carriages, they took everything away from them - many also had their clothes stripped off and were left with only a shirt to their skin. They selected 300 young men from the entire camp and sent them to the labour camp in Skarżysko - the rest were sent to Treblinka. Among all the others, I also saw my parents being taken. My father was ill and walked with faltering feet. He was walking with Mother among the last ones. What could I do then? I could only join them and go into the carriage with everybody else. We stood for a long while, until they began looking at us with suspicion. We wound our way to the railway station and travelled back to Częstochowa.

They left [only] 23 Jews in Radomsko, whom they later shot. Many Jews were still hiding in bunkers and the Germans were not able to locate them. They captured one Jew and forced him to go around with them in the courtyards, yelling, "Come out, Jews! They will do you no harm". In this manner,

¹³ [TN: Pet name most likely derived from the last syllable of the author's given name – *Aron*.]

they gathered 350 people, whom they took outside the town. They fetched Poles to dig graves for them and shot them all. That was the end of the Radomsko Ghetto and, that same week, all the other ghettos in the district were liquidated.

Aron Brandes

Kibbutz Negba